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ABSTRACT

"Purpose" is an important term in rhetorical theory and writing pedagogy. An analysis of the presentation of "purpose" in three well-regarded, theory-based textbooks ("Writing in the Liberal Arts Tradition: A Rhetoric with Readings," "Writing with a Purpose," and "Form and Surprise in Composition") suggests that "purpose" is a more complex and relative concept than is typically acknowledged. All three textbooks present radically different versions of "purpose," corresponding to three different rhetorical traditions: Classical-Poetic, Romantic, and Classical-Rhetorical. It makes more sense to think of "purpose" in writing as a relative term with meanings that vary in particular kinds of rhetorical situations. For example, in highly determined social contexts, "purpose" is the action that writers want their readers to take with respect to an exigence. On the other extreme are "free" rhetorical situations in which the audience is not specified, the exigence not given, the genre unknown--the type of writing sometimes assigned in freshman writing. Because the meaning of "purpose" is unstable, teachers should not generalize about how writers arrive at "purpose." In addition, "purpose" should always be seen as relative to the particular social situation that the writing course imagines itself serving. (MM)

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The Meanings of 'Purpose'

Arthur E. Walzer

"Purpose" is an important and commanding term in rhetorical theory and writing pedagogy. But the meaning of "purpose" may be far less stable than we think when we exhort a student "to clarify your purpose" or routinely list "purpose" as parallel to audience, genre, exigence, and persona among the constituents of a rhetorical situation. Indeed, this paper has its origin in my suspicion that "purpose" is an example of what Francis Bacon in the Novum Organum identified as the "most troublesome of all idols" to those interested in the advancement of learning, the "Idol of the Marketplace." Because language takes its meaning from its use in the ordinary commerce of life where precision is not always expected, the meaning of a particular term may not be as specified as scholars assume, Bacon insists. A key term, though widely and confidently used by scholars, may, when brought to scrutiny, prove to be "nothing else than a mark loosely and confusedly applied to denote a variety of actions which will not bear to be reduced to a constant meaning" ( ).

In a sense, we all know what purpose is or at least what a paper with a purpose feels like. As writers, a confidence in our choices is a sign that we have a grasp of our purpose. When we know what leads to follow, what to ignore, what to expand and what to cut, we know we have grasp of our purpose. As readers, too, we are aware when a paper has a purpose: a feeling of expectations being met and consistency of tone indicate a clear purpose in a paper. Most would probably agree with the generalization that writers who have a grasp of their purpose have a consistent principle for selection, an organizing principle; that papers with a purpose arouse and fulfill desires--to draw on Kenneth Burke's definition of form. Purpose, then, is manifest by the felt presence of a certain kind of consistency; its presence appeals to what Aristotle calls in the Poetics our instinct for harmony. On this level, on the level of what it feels like as a writer to have settled on a purpose and what, as a reader, a paper with a purpose sounds like we agree on "purpose."

There is also considerable consensus on the language used to describe purpose in writing. The three purposes of ancient lineage--to move, to teach, to please--show up with considerable consistency in modern textbooks as to persuade, to inform, and to entertain. For scholars and teachers of writing, this tradition of purpose was given its definitive modern treatment in James Kinneavy's A Theory of Discourse (1971). Professor Kinneavy evolved from the communication triangle four master aims or purposes--persuasive, when rhetorical choice is made predominately to move or accommodate a reader; referential, when rhetorical choices are made manifestly to reveal reality or a part of it exactly; literary, when choices are made with particular attention to the unity or beauty of the text itself; and expressive, when choices are made to reveal the writer's response.

Periodically, however, discordant chords seem to call this settled agreement into question. Nine years ago Cy Knoblauch complained that the taxonomy of purposes in A Theory of Discourse has little relevance to the way writers behave in creating texts. Knoblauch maintained that since

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writers do not set out to be referential, for instance, Kinneavy's presentation of purpose is not helpful. This theory and others like it, Knoblauch wrote, blur "an important distinction between the kinds of purposes that actually initiate discourse and those that merely define categories in which completed discourse may be located" (154). More recently, Linda Flower echoed Knoblauch's complaint: our theory says little about how writers fabricate a purpose and our textbooks even less, Flower observed in calling for empirical studies that would explore what writers actually do (529).

The putative disjunction between our theory of purpose and our pedagogy may be symptomatic of an even larger uncertainty about the meaning of purpose as applied to writing. The meaning of "purpose" may be far less stable than the wide currency of an an accepted taxonomy and terminology would suggest. To test this hypothesis, I examined the presentation of purpose in three well-regarded, ambitious, theory-based textbooks: Writing in the Liberal Arts Tradition: A Rhetoric with Readings, by James Kinneavy, William McCleary, and Neil Nakadate; Writing with a Purpose by Joseph F. Trimmer and James M. McCrimmon; and Form and Surprise in Composition by John C. Bean and John D. Ramage. As I will show, these textbooks present radically different versions of "purpose" and these versions correspond to three different rhetorical traditions, traditions which I call the Classical-poetic, the Romantic, and the Classical-rhetorical.

Writing In the Liberal Arts Tradition and the Classical-Poetic Tradition

Writing in the Liberal Arts Tradition, which translates Professor Kinneavy's theory of purpose into a writing pedagogy, links the meaning of "purpose" to the conventions of genre. The textbook is predicated on the assumption that genres are the repository of purposes. In fact, if a writer knows what genre she or he is writing in, the writer has a purpose. The example with which the textbook begins bears this conclusion out. The same incident--an angry husband's destruction of his and his wife's home with a bulldozer on the day their divorce decree was final--is presented in four different accounts: a newspaper report, an angry letter from the wife to a friend, a plea to a jury by the husband's attorney, and a poem by John Ciardi. The authors contrast the examples on the bases of each of five elements of the writing situation: the persona, audience, context, medium, and purpose, claiming for purpose a crucial importance. But by the time they have compared the different accounts on the first four of these bases, talking of purpose seems superfluous. For example, the authors point out that the persona of the newspaper report is neutral, the readers uninvolved residents of the community, and that the medium dictates "the traditional journalistic format" (9). If a writer were told all this, in fact if a writer were told only to write an account for a local newspaper on a husband's destruction of his and his wife's home on the day of his divorce decree, what more would need to be said about "purpose"? In this text, purpose is the sum of the constraints of the rhetorical situation as they are embodied in genre.

The association of purpose with genre is reflected in the subtitle of Writing in the Liberal Arts Tradition: A Rhetoric with Readings and the method of instruction as well. As the subtitle suggests, that the book is based on the commonplace that one learns to write by reading, a commonplace, which is not less profound for being common. The method that informs the book is imitation. The authors present models that students read and then imitate--closely. The textbook's presentation of imitation is not to be confused with the tradition of models that once characterized instruction in the "modes of development," which typically presented an example of

comparison and contrast from sophisticated essay and then invited students to imitate the model in their papers comparing dormitory fare to Mom's cooking. This textbook understands imitation and genre in more subtle and sophisticated ways. It is a modern version of the classical model of imitation that assumes that, by reading, writers become familiar with the conventions of genre and acquire a sense of the appropriate that can serve as a basis for rhetorical choice in their own writing of the same type.

The assumption that informs Writing in the Liberal Arts Tradition is, then, that purposes are conventional and traditional. . The traditions that inform genre are rich--not to be found in analyses by rhetoricians but tacitly known by communities of readers familiar with them. But to say that purposes are conventional and traditional is to say that purpose is chosen, not discovered, and that purposes are finite in number, historically conditioned, and publicly available.

The assumption that purposes for writing are embodied in the conventions of genre and known through imitation is a main thread in the classical tradition. The theory is especially prominent in revivals of the classical tradition such as that which occurred in the Renaissance. Invention in this tradition begins with the awareness that one is composing a particular type of poem, a type established in its greatest examples and codified in theory; writers adopt the types' characteristic aims and methods as their purpose. C. S. Lewis imagines that this was how Milton approached writing Paradise Lost: "The first question he [Milton] asked himself was not, 'What do I want to say?' but 'What kind of poem do I want to make?'--to which of the great pre-existing kind, so different in the expectations they excite and fulfil, so diverse in their powers, so recognizably distinguished in the minds of all cultured readers, do I intend to contribute? The parallel is not to be found in a modern author considering what his unique message is and what unique idiom will best convey it, but rather in a gardener asking whether he will make a rockery or a tennis court, an architect asking whether he is to make a church or a house . . . . The things between which choice is to be made already exist in their own right, each with a character of its own well established in the public world and governed by its own laws. If you choose one, you lose the specific beauties and delights of the other: for your aim is not mere excellence, but the excellence proper to the thing chosen . . . " (2).

This view of purpose has its origin in Aristotle's Poetics, where epic and drama are discussed as types within a literary tradition. According to this tradition, the basis for rhetorical choice, for purpose, is not the author's personal taste or preference, but past practice as embodied in the expectations of readers. It is a social view of purpose because the readers' expectations are shaped by their familiarity with the tradition in which the writer works. Writers who successfully subsume purpose and method to a tradition they share with their readers meet the ideals of Classical-poetic tradition, which are expressed in such rhetorical values as "propriety" and "decorum."

Writing with a Purpose and the Romantic Tradition

The view of purpose taken by the authors of the second textbook, Joseph F. Trimmer and James M. McCrimmon in Writing with a Purpose, contrasts sharply with that taken by Professors Kinneavy, McCleary, and Nakadate. These authors do not see purpose in terms of the conventions of genre. In fact, they take up this view to dismiss it as a view held by "inexperienced writers":

> Inexperienced writers occasionally have difficulty with a purpose, because they see many purposes: to complete the assignment, to earn a good grade, to

> publish their writing. These "purposes" are outside the writing situation, but they certainly influence the way you think about your purpose. For example, if you want a good grade, you will define your purpose in terms of your teacher's writing assignment. If you want to publish your essay, then you will define your purpose in terms of a given publication's statements about its editorial policies" (16).

Presumably, the "inexperienced writers" would not include Kinneavy, McCleary, and Nakadate. Nevertheless, the constraints imposed by an assignment or an editor are analogous to the constraints characteristic of particular genres that are constitutive of purpose for Professors Kinneavy, McCleary, and Nakadate.

Genuine purpose for Trimmer and McCrimmon is not linked to genre but to the writer's subconscious intentions. The process for discovering purpose does not begin with tradition but with bringing subconscious intentions to consciousness as their definition of "purpose" suggests:

> "When purpose is considered as an element inside the writing situation, the term has a specific meaning: purpose is the overall design that governs what writers do in their writing. Writers who have determined their purpose know what kind of information they need, how they want to organize and develop it, and why they think it is important. In effect, purpose directs and controls all the decisions writers make. It is the what of the process and the how--that is, the specific subject the writer selects and the strategies, from establishing organization to refining style, the writer uses to communicate the subject most effectively (16).

Note that in the first half of the definition the authors do not say that purpose is the basis or rationale for the design of a composition; nor that it is chosen by the writer. Rather, they claim that purpose is the design and that it governs the writer--that it directs and controls the decisions writers make. This definition suggests that arriving at a purpose is not a conscious activity undertaken by the writer. The writer follows the direction of a subconscious force that gradually surfaces to the conscious level as the writer's "purpose." Professors Trimmer and McCrimmon continue as follows:

> The difficulty with this definition is that finding a purpose to guide you through the writing process is the purpose of the writing process. Writing is both a procedure for discovering what you know and a procedure for demonstrating what you know. For that reason, you must maintain a double vision of your purpose. You must think of it as a preliminary objective that helps illuminate the decisions you make. You must also think of it as a final assertion that helps you implement what you intend to do in your writing (16)

The dual nature of discovering purpose--viewed both as a subconscious activity that directs the writer and as a conscious aim that that the writer pursues--is underscored in the last two sentences of this definition. Here"purpose" is first an "objective" that helps the writer understand decisions the writer makes. This suggests that writers make decisions that they don't understand, write things without knowing why. An evolving

sense of purpose explains choices already made as a writer gradually becomes aware of her or his intentions. At this point, purpose becomes a "final assertion" that can form the basis for subsequent revision.

For Trimmer and McCrimmon, then, purpose is not, as it is for Kinneavy, McCleary, and Nakadate, publicly available, but personal and partly subconscious, not conventional but unique. The contrast is especially manifest in the case study of a hypothetical writing process that Trimmer and McCrimmon provide. The example shows a student working through a number of versions of the same paper before discovering his purpose. As drafts, the student produces a narrative about the class trip to Washington DC, an objective description of the Washington Monument in the manner of a tour guide, and an entertaining history of the construction of the Washington monument, which he lights on as the final version because it reflects his purpose. From the point of view of Kinneavy, McCleary, and Nakadate, each of the drafts of the essay had a purpose--the first one expressive, the second referential, and the third rhetorical--any one of which could have been perfected into a successful paper. From their point of view, if the writer knew what his reader expected, knew in what genre he was to write, he certainly could have written more efficiently. If, at the outset, he had been told that there are different genres, here's some examples, choose one, the writer could have arrived at his purpose more efficiently. But Trimmer and McCrimmon assume that a writer has unique story to tell, in a unique idiom--that is, has a unique purpose, linked to subconscious intentions--and that the writer must discover what this story and purpose are and must discover(not chose) a form organic to those intentions. For these authors, the process of discovering a purpose is a negotiation between a writer's personal vision and objective reality. Genre is irrelevant to both. Moreover, from this point of view, thinking about genre is dangerous because doing so will produce writing that does not reflect the writer's true intentions and true self, but will produce alienated writing reflecting conventional purposes but not personal conviction.

Trimmer and McCrimmon's theory that sees purpose as having its origin in the subconscious of the writer has its roots in Romanticism. Their definition of purpose as a balanced stance the writer achieves between a subjective inner vision and and the objective outer reality shares similarities to Coleridge's "Dynamic Philosophy," which presents the creative mind as synthesizing the contrary forces of self and nature (Abrams, 118-19). Even more important, Professor Trimmer and McCrimmon's description of the composing process parallels the Romantics' view of the creative process. For the Romantics, as also for Professors Trimmer and McCrimmon, invention should begin, not in tradition or convention, but in the involuntary activity of the subconscious. As Goethe wrote, "everything which the genius does as genius eventuates unconsciously" (Abrams 211). But Coleridge and many other Romantics also thought that while the subconscious is the origin of an involuntary, mysterious creativity, the conscious mind had its necessary part to play in the creation of art. The need for conscious revision as well as subconscious inspiration is seen in Coleridge's insistence that great as Shakespeare's genius was his judgment was the equal of it (Abrams 224), in Goethe's insistence that the "man of genius" can and must eventually also operate rationally, and from conscious conviction (211), and in the extensive revisions which mark the manuscripts of Keats's greatest poems. The writing process Professors Trimmer and McCrimmon present parallels this Romantic description of the creative

process. They envision a writing process intended to foster the gradual and continual revelation of the writer's unconscious as the originator of purpose; revisions made in the light of the purpose as revealed involuntarily should follow later, only as subconscious purpose manifest itself and its intentions become the basis for conscious revision.

Form and Surprise in Composition and the Classical-Rhetorical Tradition

In the third textbook, Bean and Ramage's Form and Surprise in Composition, purpose is linked to exigence and efficacy; that is, purpose has to do with a writer's discovering a rationale for his paper (for example, a problem that needs to be addressed) and a reader who can be moved to solve the problem. Purpose for Professors Bean and Ramage is moving a reader to correct an exigence: "Experienced writers . . .," they write, "express purpose in terms of the impact they want their essays to have on their audience. Do you want your audience to learn something? To experience or feel something? To become aware of something they were previously unaware of? To change their minds about something? To do something?" The distinction here between learning something, feeling something, doing something and so forth seems to echo Kinneavy , McCleary, and Nakadate's sense of "purpose," but Bean and Ramage really have a different meaning of "purpose" in mind. For them, purpose is linked to exigence and reader, not to genre and model, and the need for information and the need for action are really different means to the same end--an impact on a reader. In the book, they trace as an example of the composing process, an engineering professor's writing of a paper on assigning writing in engineering classes:

> Again, our civil engineering friend had a major problem discovering his purpose. Did his audience already believe in giving writing assignments in engineering courses but not know how to go about it? If so, then his essay would have to include lots of how-to information and examples. Or was his audience skeptical about using writing assignments, believing that teaching writing was the job of the English Department? If so, then his essay would have to persuade readers that writing assignments could actually help students learn engineering. He would have to reduce his "how-to" examples and include instead a lengthier discussion of theory and some testimonial success stories. In short, what you put into an essay depends on why you are writing it as well as to whom you are writing it."

In seeking for his purpose, the engineer-writer has to probe the nature of the problem. The writer reflects on his problem: engineering professors do not assign much writing; what prevents them from doing so? The writer's purpose is to move the audience of engineering professors to assign more writing. The writer confronts a resisting reader, and the writer's must understand that resistance and overcome it. The "how-to" information and the examples are possible instrumental means in the service of a persuasive purpose. For Bean and Ramage, the paradigm case of "purpose" evolves out of the persuasive model of discourse. All discourse fits this model.

The importance of the "surprise" of the book's title bears out the linking of "purpose" is to efficacy and exigence in this book. Bean and Ramage maintain that the general purpose of writing as to change the reader's view of the world (113) and surprise is the

crucial strategy in overcoming the reader's inertia or resistance to change. The purpose of the writing process is to bring this perspective to bear first on the writer's own mind: writers must surprise themselves, must complicate their own views, if they are eventually to change their readers'. To this end, the writing process is directed toward creating tension in the writer's own mind. Students are taught the value of questioning their assumptions as a way to "setting the mind at war with itself" (52-3), the value of doubt (37) as a way to see a second or third view, and the value of problematizing experience (41) as a way to foster critical thinking. Ultimately, the battleground in the war against complacency and oversimplification moves outside of the writer's mind to the reader's. "Good writers," Bean and Ramage write, "are problem-finders, people who can pose questions in such a way that readers feel difficulties, uncertainties, or knowledge gaps that they would not otherwise have felt" (159-60). Purpose in writing, then, always involves creating an exigence for a reader and addressing the exigence in the paper.

The view of genre presented in this book is similarly revealing of this essentially audience-centered view of purpose. Genre is not seen in terms of rhetorical conventions or tradition. It is seen predominately in terms of the rhetorical situation--especially exigence and audience. The two genres that receive the most attention are the "problem-solution essay" and the "Issue/Defense" essay. The essential difference in these two similar types is the degree of resistance of the reader to the writer's view. Issues are, by definition, controversies, and readers bring to the essay well-formed opinions that must be directly confronted (256). A problem may be a defect in understanding rather than a disagreement or controversy. The challenge for the rhetorician is, however, nonetheless one of moving a reader to address an exigence: "As a writer, your job is to pose problems for readers, make them want to cross the bridge you build for them, and then take them on a surprising journey to new places." (159). Genre and purpose evolve out of this view of the writer's relationship to reader and subject.

Bean and Ramage's view of purpose as moving resisting readers to solve problem is linked to the pragmatic tradition of rhetoric as language used as a form of social action. Rhetoric is a force for social change or for the resolution of conflict. The tradition is agonistic: rhetoric is weapon in the battle for the reader's allegiance or commitment. This is the most ancient of rhetoric's traditions. The first school of rhetoric, founded in the fifth century BC by Corax, was a response to the need to resolve conflict: after the fall of a tyrannical government, people had to establish the rights to property they claimed was theirs before it had been illegally seized (Vickers 6). This situation is exemplary of Bean and Ramage's model: a rhetor addressing an exigence in order to move a reader to resolve the exigence as the rhetor wants. In this tradition, genre is shaped not by literary traditions but by practical needs. The genres of Aristotle's Rhetoric--forensic, deliberative, and epidiectic--reflect the needs for speeches in the courts, legislative assemblies, and at funerals. Furthermore, by this tradition, invention begins by reflecting on the occasion. Speeches or essays take their character not from the tastes and genius of the writer or the excellences of the type but from the particulars of the occasion that prompt them. In this tradition, rhetoric responds to the social and political constraints of particular rhetorical situations, not to the compulsions or personality of a particular rhetor or to the conventions of a literary traditon. Bean and Ramage view rhetoric in this pragmatic way--as rhetoric was viewed by Aristotle and Cicero, as it is

presented in such modern definitions of rhetoric as those of Donald Bryant and Lloyd Bitzer, and as it is generally viewed in departments of speech communication today.

Conclusion

This analysis of the meanings of "purpose" suggest that "purpose" is a more complex and relative concept than we typically acknowledge when we exhort students to "have a clear sense of purpose." It would make more sense, it seems to me, to think of "purpose" in writing not as a single and stable meaning but as relative term with meanings that vary with particular kinds of rhetorical situations. On one extreme, in highly determined social contexts, "purpose" is the action we want our reader to take with respect to an exigence. The state legislature is considering a law mandating seat belts and you favor such legislation. Your letter to your representative has a clear, definite purpose: to move her to vote for the legislation. You subordinate everything in your letter to moving your reader in the direction you want her to go. This is the paradigm case the writer faces for Bean and Ramage. On the other extreme are "free" rhetorical situations in which the audience is not specificed, the exigence not given, the genre unknown--the type of writing sometimes assigned in freshman writing. With no public constraints that might serve as the basis of rhetorical choice, the writer is, thus, thrown back on his own preferences. To know his purpose he must discover what those preferences are. This is paradigm case of the writer for Trimmer and McCrimmon. Finally, there are situations in which the constraints of the rhetorical situation figure tacitly, where they are present but unacknowledged because tradition is so strong that conventional practice is assumed the only way. We all know of academic scientists who have no sense of what "rhetorical constraints" are and no intention of writing "what they really think"; nevertheless they write rhetorically appropriate papers because they have been socialized to the values embodied in the conventional formulas of the genre they write in. In such circumstances, the paradigm case for Kinneavy, McCleary and Nakadate, it makes more sense to talk about "purpose" in terms of formats and the writing process in terms of tacit imitation of models than to talk about rhetorical situations or subconscious intention.

If the meanings of "purpose" vary with the rhetorical situation of the writer and with the tradition of the theorist, if the meaning of "purpose" is unstable, then some caveats would seem in order. First, in empirical studies of the writing process, we should be careful in generalizing about how writers arrive at "purpose": this may depend more on the constraints contained in the rhetorical situation presented by the experiment than on the experience or talent of the subject-writers. Second, with regard to rhetorical theory, we would be better served if we spoke of purpose in terms of particular paradigmatic rhetorical situations, not generally. Finally, with regard to our teaching of writing, we should not pretend that "purpose" is a generic, but always see it as relative to the particular social situation that the writing course imagines itself serving.

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